

The story of Joseph the Carpenter

Anthony Alcock

Preface

It should be pointed out at the beginning that this article is not a work of original scholarship: the translation is made from a printed text and the notes are largely based on those of a scholarly study (see below) which has not been challenged by any serious student of the subject. My own contribution is merely a translation into English that is intended to be faithful both to the source language and the target language, with a few observations that supplement those in the aforementioned study.

In order to distinguish between the uses of the term: 'Father' refers to God and 'father' to Joseph.

The texts of this story are published in P. de Lagarde *Aegyptiaca* (Göttingen, 1883), which can be downloaded from Internet Archive.

Joseph the Carpenter: 1-37.

Dormition of Mary: 38 - 63

Wisdom of Solomon: 64 - 106

Ecclesiastes: 107 - 206

Psalms: 207 - 208

Apostolic Canons: 209 -291

The principal text of Joseph the Carpenter is in Bohairic, with a complete Arabic text and fragments of a Sahidic text. The Arabic text, published by Georg Wallin in Leipzig 1722 with a Latin version, is in Paris (the Bibliothèque Nationale). M.R. James used the Latin version to provide a

summary of the text for his *Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford, 1924) p.84ff. The Sahidic fragments are in Rome (*Catalogus codicum copticorum* 1782 no. 121). Only sections 14 to the beginning of 24 of the Sahidic version have survived. The English version is based on the Bohairic, and reference is made from time to time to the other two versions.

I would like to say a few words about Lagarde's book and some of the remarks he makes in the preface. First, the title page: he makes it clear that he paid for the publication himself ('studio et sumptibus edita'); he provides no list of contents, and that is why I have written one. He makes it clear that he did the work not for the benefit of Egyptologists, but for theologians; and anyone who complains about the quality of the work would do well to remember that these texts would have remained unpublished 'if I, not a specialist in Egyptian, had not undertaken the work').

Lagarde was a curious man: deeply learned in matters relating to the ancient world of Judaism and early Christianity, but also deeply anti-Semitic. Since his entire book consists of textual material only, it is not surprising that he provides no comments on the text, apart from the Biblical quotations in it and a sparse critical apparatus.

The major study of this story was published in 1951 by Siegfried Morenz (*Die Geschichte vom Joseph dem Zimmermann*, Berlin and Leipzig), the published version of his 1941 PhD thesis submitted at Leipzig. Morenz's book is divided into 4 sections: the translation of the complete Bohairic and the incomplete Sahidic text; detailed commentary on the text; history and form of the text; relationship to the world in which it was written. The notes that I provide following the translation are mostly a digest of the enormously elaborate commentary of Morenz, with a few observations of my own. I did not consider it useful to distinguish between the two. Italicized words in the translation indicate that there is a note on them following the translation.

Anyone who has more than a passing interest in the text would do well to consult Morenz's book.

Translation

0. This is the *coming forth* from the body of Joseph the carpenter, the human father of Jesus Christ, who spent *III years* in his life. Our Saviour told the apostles about his entire *life* on the Mount of Olives. The apostles wrote it down and deposited it in the *library in Jerusalem*. Joseph died on the *26th Epip* in the peace of God. Amen.

1. One day, when our good Saviour was sitting on the Mount of Olives, surrounded by his disciples, he said to them, "My beloved brethren and children of my good Father, whom he has chosen from the entire world, you know how often I have told you that I have to be *crucified* and taste death on behalf of all mankind, that I will rise again from the dead and that I will entrust to you the preaching of the gospel throughout the whole world. I will grant to you strength from on high and fill you with a holy spirit, so that you may preach to all the nations of the earth, telling them to repent. For it is better that a man should find a *cup of water* in the world to come than all the riches of the present world; a single footstep in the house of my Father is better than all the wealth of this world; and furthermore a single hour of the just rejoicing is better than a thousand years of sinners weeping and moaning, for their tears will not be wiped away and they will be consigned to oblivion. Therefore, my revered limbs, when you go forth, preach to them that my Father will *settle His accounts* with you using a just scale and a just measure and that everything they say will be examined. Just as there is no escape from death, so there is no escape from one's actions, whether they are good or bad. And remember this too, that nobody will escape because of his influence or wealth. Now listen,

and I will tell you the life story of my father Joseph, the aged and revered carpenter."

2. There was a man called Joseph, who lived in the town of Bethlehem, a Jewish town that was the home of King David. He had learned *wisdom and the skill of carpentry*. Joseph was married in the eyes of God, and his wife had given him sons and daughters: four boys called Judas, Justus, Jacob and Simeon, and two girls called Lysia and Lydia. His wife died when Jacob was quite small. He was a righteous man who praised God in all things and he worked with his two sons at his trade, which provided them with a living according to the law of Moses. And it was to this man, my human father, that my mother Mary was betrothed.

3. When my father Joseph became a widow, *Mary*, my mother for her part, she of all good and blessed ways, was in the temple of God serving Him in purity. She was twelve years old and had spent three years with her parents and nine years in the temple of the Lord. When the priests saw that she lived modestly and in the fear of the Lord, they said, "Let us find a good man and betroth her to him until it is time for her to marry lest we allow the custom of women to happen to her in the temple, for it would be very sinful of us."

4. They then summoned the tribe of Juda and selected from it twelve men in accordance with the number of tribes in Israel. The choice fell upon that worthy elder, my human father Joseph. The priests told my mother to accompany Joseph and remain obedient to him until the wedding. Joseph took Mary home, where she found Jacob a poor orphan and set about caring for him. And so she came to be called '*mother of Jacob*'. After Joseph had installed her in his house, he went about his business as a carpenter. Mary spent two years in his house until the *good time*.

5 In the *fourteenth year* of her life *I came of my own accord*. I came into

existence inside her, I the living Jesus, your life. After Mary had been pregnant for three months, the innocent Joseph returned home from the place where he did his carpentry and found his wife pregnant. Troubled and afraid, he decided to put her away secretly. He was so distressed that he neither ate nor drank.

6. In the middle of the night Gabriel, the archangel of joy, came to him in a vision, in accordance with the instructions of my good Father. He said to him, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary for your wife. The child she will bear is from a Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son whom you will call Jesus. He is the one who will rule all nations with a rod of iron." The angel then left Joseph, who arose from his sleep and did as he had been instructed by the angel of the Lord. He took Mary for his wife.

7. After these things a decree came forth from Augustus the king that everyone in the world should give his name, each one according to his town. Joseph, well advanced in years, took Mary my Virgin mother to his town of Bethlehem (for she was near to giving birth). He wrote his name *in the presence* of the scribe: Joseph the son of David with Mary his wife and Jesus his son, being from the tribe of Juda. And Mary my mother gave birth to me on the way to Bethlehem at the *cave of Rachêl*, the wife of Jacob the patriarch, the mother of Joseph and Benjamin.

8. Satan advised Herod the Great, the father of Archelaus, who had taken off the head of my beloved relative John. Thus he sought after me to kill me, thinking that my kingdom was of this world. Joseph was told by my Father in a vision. He rose up, took me and my mother Mary, I sitting on her lap, Salome walking behind us, and we went down to Egypt. We stayed there a full year until the body of Herod had turned into worms *and he died* because of the blood of the small innocent children whom he had put to death.

9. When that lawless Herod died, we returned to Israel and lived in a town of

Galilee called Nazareth. My father Joseph, the blessed *elder*, did his work as a carpenter, we living from his handiwork. He never ate bread that was not earned, in accordance with the law of Moses.

10. After this long time. his body did not become weak, his eyes did not become dim, not *a single tooth* decayed in his mouth, he did not lose his understanding or wisdom in this whole time, but he was like a youth, having reached the age of 111 years in a good old age.

11. His two grown-up sons, Justus and Simeon, married and went to (live in) their own house and his two daughters likewise married, as it is appointed to everyone. Joseph lived with his youngest son Jacob. When the Virgin gave birth to me, I lived with them in all filial submission, for I have done everything human *except for sin alone*. I called Mary my mother and Joseph my father, and I obeyed them in everything they would say to me and I did not answer them back in anything, but I loved them very much.

12. It happened after this that the *death of Joseph* drew near, as it is appointed for everyone. When his body became ill, his angel told him, "In this year you will die." And when his soul became troubled, he went to Jerusalem and went into the temple of the Lord, made obeisance before the altar and prayed as follows:

13. "God the Father of all mercy and God of all flesh, the Lord of my soul, my body and my spirit. If the days of my life which you gave to me in this world are complete, then I beg you, Lord God, to send to me Michael the Archangel that he may stand beside me until my wretched soul comes forth from my body without pain or trouble, for the death of every person is a great fear and distress, whether man, beast domestic or wild, reptile or bird. In a word, every living creature that is under heaven, which has a living soul, experiences pain and distress, until their soul separates from their body. Now then, my Lord,

may your angel stand with my soul and body until they separate from each other without pain. Do not let your angel which has been assigned to me since the day you *formed* me until now fill his face with anger at me on my way to you. But let him be peaceful with me. Let not those with *different faces* give me trouble on my way to you. Let not those who are upon the gates hold back my soul and do not give me shame at your fearful tribunal. Do not let the waves of the *river of fire* be fierce to me, the one in which every soul is cleansed before it sees the glory of your divinity. God who gives justice to each person in truth and righteousness, now my Lord, let your mercy be a comfort to me, for you are the spring of all good things. Glory is yours for ever and ever. Amen."

14. It happened after these things that he came down to Nazareth, the town where he lived and fell into the illness from which he was to die, as it is appointed to every person. His illness was much more serious than all the others he had ever suffered in his life. Here is the mode of life of my beloved father, Joseph. He was 40 when he married and spent another 49 years living with his wife, and she died. He spent a year alone, and my mother spent another two years in his house, when she had been given to him by the priests, who instructed him to watch over her until the time for matrimony. At the beginning of the third year in his house (when she was fifteen), she gave birth to me on earth in a mystery. There is no-one who *knows* it in all creation except me and my Father and the Holy Spirit, we being a unity.

15. The total life-span of my father Joseph, the blessed elder, were 111 years, as my good Father ordained. The day he died was the 26th of Epip. The select *gold* began to change, that is the flesh of my father Joseph, and the *silver* transformed, that is the intellect and wisdom. He became oblivious of eating and drinking. His carpentry skills went astray. When the dawn broke on that day, the 26th of Epip, my father Joseph became very troubled on his bed. He sighed deeply. He clapped his hands together. He cried out,

16. "Woe to me today, woe to the day when my mother brought me into this world.

Woe to the belly from which I took the seed of life.

Woe to the breasts from which I took milk.

Woe to the feet at which I sat.

Woe to the hands which raised me until I grew up and fell into sin.

Woe to my tongue and my lips, because they have become twisted many times with evil and slander and lies and vain empty words full of deceit.

Woe to my eyes, for they have looked at scandals.

Woe to my ears, for they like to hear nonsense.

Woe to my hands, for they have taken things that do not belong to them.

Woe to my belly and nerves, for they desire to eat things that do not belong to them. When it (belly) finds things, it burns them up more than an oven burning at full flame and makes them useless in every way.

Woe to my feet, these which serve my body badly, taking it on ways that are not good.

Woe to my body, for it has made my soul a wasteland and alien to God who created it.

What am I to do now ? I am enclosed *on all sides*.

Truly, woe to all men who sin.

Truly, this is the great trouble which I saw above Jacob my father as he was coming forth from the body; it is what is making me wretched today.

But Jesus, God, the Intermediary of my soul and body performs his will in me."

17. My beloved father Joseph having said these things, I got up and went in to him while he was lying down and found him disturbed in his soul and spirit. I said to him, "Greetings, my beloved father Joseph, of goodly and blessed old age." He replied in great fear of death, saying to me, "Many greetings, my beloved son. My soul has recovered a little now that I have heard your voice.

Jesus my Lord, Jesus my King of Truth, my good and merciful Saviour, Jesus the one who restores, Jesus the guide, the *protector*, Jesus the one who has everything in the grip of His goodness, the one whose name is sweet in the mouth of everyone and is very powerful, Jesus the seeing eye, the hearing ear in truth, hear me today, I His servant, I beg you, I shed my tears in your presence. You are God in truth, you are the Lord in truth, as the angel has told me many times, especially that day when my heart troubled me because of a human thought towards the Blessed Virgin, because she had conceived a child and I thought that I would throw her out secretly. As I was thinking of this, the angel appeared to me in a vision, saying, 'Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary to your wife. The one whom she will bear is from a Holy Spirit. Be in no doubt about her conception. She will bear a son, and you will call him Jesus.' You are Jesus Christ, the Saviour of my soul and my body and my spirit. Do not blame me, your servant and handiwork. I did not know, my Lord, nor do I understand the mystery of your *incredible* birth, nor have I ever heard that a woman conceived without a man. But a Virgin has given birth, though confirmed in her virginity. O Lord, if the appointment of this were not a mystery, I would not believe in you or your sacred birth. I recall the day when the *viper* bit the child and he died. His people surrounded you to give you up to Herod. Your mercy touched him. You raised him about whom they said that you had killed him. There was great joy in the house of the one who had died. At that moment I seized your ear, I said to you, 'Be wise, my Son.' At that moment you reproached me, 'If you were not my father according to the flesh, I would tell you what you have done to me.' Now, my Lord and my God, if you have reckoned with me about that day, you have caused these signs of fear to come upon me. I beg your goodness not to bring me to be judged by you. I am your servant and the son of your servant. If you loosen my chains, I will offer a blessed sacrifice to you, namely confession of the glory of your divinity, that you are Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God in truth and the Son of Man at the same time."

18. As my father Joseph said these things, I did not remain *tearless*, and I wept as I looked at him, knowing that death had overcome him, and I heard the wretched words he said. After this, my brothers, I thought about my death on the cross for the life of this whole world. My mother Mary then stood up, whose name is sweet in the mouth of everyone who loves me. She said to me in great sorrow, "Woe to me, my beloved Son, *is* Joseph of goodly and blessed old age, your revered father according to the flesh *is going to die* ? " I said to her, "My beloved mother, who among the men with a physical body (lit. who have worn flesh) will not taste death ? For death is the ruler of mankind. My blessed mother, you too will have to die like all humans. Whether it is Joseph or you, my blessed mother, your death is not a death, but an eternal life that is perfect. I myself will not die at all because of the mortal flesh that I wear. Now, therefore, my beloved mother, arise and go into the blessed elder Joseph and you will find out what has been ordained for him from on high."

19. She stood up and went to the bedroom and found him with the sign of death around him. *I, my beloved, sat at his head* and Mary my mother at his feet. He raised his eyes up to my face. He was unable to speak, for the hour of death had overcome him. Then he raised his eyes and gave a great sigh. I held his hands and his feet for a long time, he looking at me and begging me not to let him be taken. And I put my hand on his breast and found that his soul had been brought up to his throat from his body. But before his last hour had been completed so that death could come, *he was unable to prevent* trembling from following him and weeping and destruction from preceding him.

20. When my beloved mother saw me holding on to his body, she held on to his feet. She found that the breath of life and warmth had gone and left them. She said to me quite openly, "Thank you, my beloved son. The moment you put your hand on his body, the warmth withdrew from him. His feet and toes became as cold as ice. " I called his children, saying to them, "Come and speak with your father, for it is the time to speak, before the mouth stops speaking

and the poor flesh becomes rigid." He was very worried about the pain of death as he was about to leave this world. Lysia the daughter of Joseph replied and said to her brothers, "Woe to me, my brothers, if this is not the same illness that happened to our beloved mother, and until now we have not seen her. This is also the same thing that is happening to our father Joseph, so that we will not see him ever." Then the children of Joseph raised their voice and wept. I myself and Mary my Virgin mother wept with them, for the hour of death had arrived.

21. I looked to the south. I saw Death. It had come into the house, followed by *Amente*, who is an instrument of Death and the Devil, and a host of fire breathing *decans*, too numerous to count, smoke and sulphur coming from their mouths. My father Joseph looked and saw those who had come for him, full of anger against him, as they are full of anger against every soul that comes forth from the body, especially *the sinners* in whom they would find a little of themselves. When the good elder saw them, accompanied by Death, his eyes wept. At that moment the soul of my father Joseph made a deep sigh, looking for a way to hide, so that it might be saved. When I saw that my father Joseph sighed, because he had seen powers that he had never seen before, I arose and chided the devil together with all who accompanied him. They departed in great shame and embarrassment. None of those sitting by my father knew, not even Mary my mother, about all the terrible forces that come for the souls of men. When Death saw that I rebuked the powers of the earth and cast them out, because they had no power over him, he (Death) was afraid. I immediately arose and spoke a prayer to my Father of great mercy, saying,

22. "My Father and the Father of all mercy, the seeing eye, the hearing ear, listen to your beloved son, myself, when I entreat you in the name of your handiwork, my father Joseph, to send me a great chorus of angels with Michael, the steward of goodness, and Gabriel, the herald of light, that they may accompany the soul of my father Joseph until it passes the *seven dark*

aeons, that it may not pass on the narrow paths where there is fear, and it is very fearful to see the powers that are on them, when the river of fire comes in that place like the tide of the sea. Be merciful to the soul of my father Joseph who is coming into your holy hands, because this is the time when he needs your mercy." I say to you, my revered brothers and my blessed apostles, that every man born into this world, when he knows the difference between good and bad, he having spent all his time dependent upon the things of his eyes, he needs the mercy of my good Father when he comes to the hour of death and when he comes to passing upon the path and the fearful tribunal and gives an account of himself. But I will turn to the exit from life of my father, a true elder.

23. When he had given up his spirit, I embraced him. His soul was taken by the angels, who put it into a winding sheet of pure silk. When I went inside, I sat beside him, and none of those sitting beside him knew that he had died. I caused Michael and Gabriel to watch over his soul because of the powers which were on the path. The angels sang as they went before it until they reached my good Father.

24. I returned to the body of my father Joseph lying like an empty vessel. I sat and brought his eyes down. *I closed them and his mouth.* I stood looking at him. I said to the Virgin, "Mary my mother, where are all the carpentry pieces that he made from his childhood to now ? They have all passed in this single hour, as if he had never been born into the world." When his sons and daughters heard me saying this to my mother Mary the Virgin, they said to me, weeping greatly, "Woe to us, Our Lord, has our father died, and we did not know ?" I said to them, "He has truly died, but the death of Joseph is not death, but life everlasting. The things which my beloved father Joseph will receive are great. From the moment his soul left the body, all pain ceased for him. He has gone to the eternal kingdom, he has left behind the weight of the body, he has left behind this world full of pain and empty care. He has gone to the

resting places of my Father who is heaven, those which will never perish."
When I said to my brothers, "Your father Joseph, the blessed elder, has died",
they arose and tore their garments and wept a long time.

25. And people of the whole town of Nazareth and Galilee heard the mourning
and all gathered at the place where we were, according to *the law of the Jews*.
They spent the whole day mourning until *the 9th hour*. At the 9th hour of the
day I had everyone ejected. *I cast water* over the body of my beloved father
Joseph. I anointed him with fragrant oil. I prayed to my good Father in heaven
with *heavenly prayers* which I wrote with my own fingers on the slab of
heaven before my incarnation through the Virgin Mary. And when I finished
my prayers, a host of angels came and I commanded two of them to spread out
a sheet and gather up the blessed body of my father Joseph into the middle of
the sheet and wrap him up in it.

26. I put my hands upon his body, saying, "Let not the stench of death master
you. Let not your ears be putrid and let not the matter dry up from your body
ever. Let not your burial shroud become rotten or your flesh which I put upon
you, but let it stay on your body until the day of the *dinner of the thousand
years*. Let not the hair of your head wither, which I have grasped in my hands
many times, my beloved father Joseph, and good will happen to you. Those
who think of an *offering* and offer it to your burial shrine on the day of your
remembrance day, the 26th of Epip, I will bless them in the heavenly offering
above. Those who give bread to the hand of the poor in your name, I will not
let them want for the good things of this world in all the days of their life.
Those who give a cup of wine to a stranger or widow or orphan on the day of
his remembrance, I will grant them to you that you may take them to the dinner
of the thousand years. Those who write the account of your death and all the
things that came out of my mouth on this day, by your health, my beloved
father Joseph, I will grant them to you in this world. If they die, I will tear up
the record of their sins and they will be unable to receive any punishment

except the fate of death and the river of fire that is before my Father, who purifies all souls. If there is a poor man and he does what I have said, if he has a son and calls him Joseph, giving glory to your name, let there be no evil or pestilence in that house of his, for truly your name is in him."

27. After these things they came to this place where the body of my father Joseph was, the important people of the town, the undertakers walking in front of them to prepare his body for burial according to the custom of the Jews. They found that the burial preparation was complete and the shroud was wrapped around his body as if it had been secured by iron bands. When they moved him, they found no opening in the shroud. After these things they took him to the grave. When they had dug the hole on it to open his mouth and put him with his fathers, I recalled the day when *he took me to Egypt* and the great troubles that happened because of me and I spread myself on his grave and wept for a long time, saying,

28. "O Death, who causes great weeping and grieving, he who is over all men has given you this miraculous authority and there is no guilt attached to Death, like Adam and his wife. Death does nothing without the command of my Father. Some die at the age of 900 years, others live long longer. None of them said, 'I have seen Death', or 'He comes *against his time* causing pain.' But he does not cause them pain except for one time, and that is time when my good Father sends him for man. At the time when He comes for him, he hears the *judgement* coming from heaven. If the judgement comes amid trouble and is full of anger, then Death himself comes in trouble and anger that he may carry out the commandment of my good Father to take the soul of man and give it to its Lord. Death is not able to cast it into the fire or the kingdom of heaven. *As for* Death, it is the bidding of God that he does. As for Adam, he is the one who did not do the will of my Father, but he transgressed, so that my Father was angry with him when he listened to his wife and disobeyed my good Father, so that He brought death upon every soul. If Adam had not disobeyed

my good Father, He would not have brought death upon him. What is there to prevent me from begging my Father to send me a great *chariot of light* to put my father Joseph in it that he might not taste of death at all and that I might cause him to be taken in the flesh in which he was born to the resting places to be with my asomatic angels ? But because of the transgression of Adam these great tribulations have come upon the whole of mankind. As long as I bear the flesh of tribulation, I must taste of death in it (flesh) for the form I created that I may have mercy on them."

29. As I *spoke* these words, I *embraced* my father Joseph and *wept* for him, the mouth of the grave was opened and his body put in it next to the body of Jacob his father. His end came in the 111th year, and not a single tooth had rotted in his mouth *nor had his eyes become dim*, but his sight was like that of a small boy. He never lost his strength, but worked as a carpenter until the day he fell into the illness from which he was to die.

30. We apostles, when we heard this from our Saviour, rejoiced. We arose immediately and kissed his hands and feet in great joy, saying, "We thank you, Our good Saviour, that you have made us worthy to hear these words of life from you, Our Lord. But we wonder, our good Saviour, why in the case of Enoch and Elijah, you granted them immortality, and to this day they are in *good things*, being in the flesh in which they were born, until now their flesh has not seen destruction. But the blessed Joseph the carpenter, the one to whom you have given this great honour of being called 'father' by you and whom you obeyed in all things. You commanded us, telling us, 'If I give power to you and send upon you the call of my Father, which is the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, and send you to preach the Holy Gospel, you will also preach my father Joseph,' and 'Say these words of life in the *testament* of his death' and 'Read these words of this testament on feast days and honoured day' and 'If *someone has* not been taught to write well, let him not read out this testament on feast days' and 'The one who *takes* from these words and *adds* to them to

make me a liar, I will reckon with him soon', and now we wonder that, from this day when you were born in Bethlehem and you called him bodily father, you did not promise him immortality and give him eternal life."

31. Our Saviour replied and said to us, "The judgement that my Father made about Adam will not be cancelled out as long as he disobeys His commandments. If my Father makes a judgement about man that he will be just, he (that man) is a chosen one for Him. If man loves the things of the devil in his will and sins and abandons Him and lives a long time, does he not know that he will come into His hands if he does not repent ? If someone lives to a great age, his works being good, his deeds are what make him an elder. If He sees someone perishing on his path, He will cause his life to be short. This is how He takes them from the half of a day. But all the prophecies which my Father has said, they will be fulfilled upon man and every thing in them will happen. And you have spoken to me about Enoch and Elijah, that they are alive in the flesh in which they were born, about Joseph that he is my father according to the flesh, and why did I not leave him in the flesh until now. Even if he had lived to ten thousand years, he had to die. I say to you, my holy limbs, that each time Enoch and Elijah think of death, they will wish that they were already dead and had escaped this great necessity that is upon them, especially because they will die in a day of disaster and fear and crying out and destruction and distress. The Antichrist will kill these two men and pour their blood on the earth because of a xestes (approx. half a litre) of water for the reproaches that they make against him, as they curse him.'

32. We replied and said, "Our Lord and God, who are these two men about whom you said that the son of destruction will kill them for a xestes of water ? "Our Saviour and our Life Jesus said to us, "Enoch and Elijah." It happened, when our good Saviour said these things to us, that we rejoiced, were happy and thanked and gave glory to him, our Saviour and Lord Jesus Christ, from Whom all glory comes and all honour is fitting to the Father and Him and the

Holy Life-Giving Spirit, now and forever and forever. Amen.

Notes.

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(a) *coming forth*: the verbal noun may be suggestive of the Ancient Egyptian (AE) *pṛt m hrw* 'coming forth by day'. Morenz translates the opening sentence as 'So ging unser Vater Joseph aus dem Leibe', which in its form suggests part of an existing narrative. The Coptic form is: 'This is ...'.

(b) *111 years*: an ideal age in Ancient Egypt was 110, as in the case of Djedi the magician at the court of Cheops (4th story of the cycle cf. W.K. Simpson *The literature of Ancient Egypt* (2003) p.18).

(c) *life*: the Greek βίος, which often refers to the period of time, unlike the Egyptian word *wn2*, which tends to refer to the process of living, as in '111 years in his life'.

(c) *Library in Jerusalem*: founded by Alexander Bishop of Jerusalem in 212 AD.

(d) *26th Epip*: the 11th month in the Coptic calendar, which corresponds to 19th-20th July. It marks the beginning of the Nile inundation, which Egyptians identified with the heliacal rising of Sirius, an event calculated for 400 AD to the 18th July cf. <http://www.cieloeterra.it/strumenti/sorgeresirio.html>. This connection is of some importance because of the association with Osiris, whose dismembered remains were deposited in the Nile by Seth and whose deathbed scene is echoed later in section 19 of this text.

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(a) *crucified*: a not uncommon form of death for enemies of the state in the

Roman world and earlier, but there is no evidence that it was practised by Jews, and the passage in Deut, 21,22 probably refers to hanging the corpse on a tree as a deterrent.

(b) *cup of water*: reference to a story in Demotic Egyptian known as the Second Tale of Setne Khaemwas, where the tortures of thirst in the 4th Hall of the underworld are mentioned. English translation by Robert Ritner in Simpson *The literature of Ancient Egypt* pp. 470ff.

(c) *settle his accounts with*: similar phrase in section 30 below.

2

The beginning of the story proper. It is in direct speech, but I have not used inverted commas to indicate this and have reserved the use of double inverted commas for direct speech that occurs in the narrative and single inverted commas for dialogue within dialogue. Jesus addresses the apostles from the time in the course of the narrative.

(a) *the wisdom and skill of carpentry*: combination of intellectual and practical knowledge (Ancient Eg. *sb3yt* and *mnht*) can be found in the Late Egyptian story known as Wenamun 2,21. They occur in the course of a curious speech by a potentate in Byblos called Tjekerbaal apparently lecturing the unfortunate Wenamun, who has been sent to Byblos to secure an adequate supply of wood for the barge of Amun-Re (cf. Simpson p. 120).

3

(a) *Mary*: the story of Mary in the temple is also told in the Protevangelium Jacobi (PJ). The dedication of a young girl to a goddess is also related in Book Three of the Ephesiaca of Xenophon.

4

(a) *Mary the mother of Jacob*: the designation 'the mother of Jacob' here, I think, reflects practice in the Near and Middle East of identifying a

parent/child by the relationship to child/parent known in Arabic as 'kunya'.

(b) *good time*: similar to the German 'Hochzeit'.

5

(a) *fourteenth year*: the PJ has '16th'.

(b) *I came of my own accord*: the Pistis Sophia, a Gnostic text, speaks of this event as taking place 'on the orders of the First Mystery', so the statement here may be understood to be anti-Gnostic. The Annunciation (Luke 1,26) is equated with conception, and Jesus has assumed the form of Gabriel. It may be of interest here to consider the story of the divine birth of the Pharaoh, first recorded in the mortuary temple of Hatshepsut at Deir el Bahri in the 16th cent. BC: the queen is visited in her chamber by Amun, who breathes into her nostrils, the sign of conception. For the resonance of this story in the Christian world, see Emma Brunner-Traut *Gelebte Mythen: Beiträge zum altägyptischen Mythos* (1988).

7

(a) *in the presence of ...*: the preposition needs to be emended: either, one understands it as **ḫꜣṯꜥn** (beside/in the presence of), where Joseph did the writing supervised by the scribe or **ꜥꜣṯꜥn** (through), where the writing was done by the scribe. Joseph clearly had no difficulty declaring Mary to be his wife in an official document, unlike in the PJ (19,1), where Joseph calls Mary his 'betroted' but insists that she is not 'my wife'.

(b) *cave of Rachêl*: this place is in fact near Bethel (17 km north of Jerusalem), but it looks as if it has been 'Christianized' to suit this text.

8

(a) *and he died*: the dates of Herod's death have been given as, among others,

4BC and 1BC, depending on how one understands an eclipse reported by Josephus. His grave was rediscovered by a team from the Hebrew University in 2007, but there was no body in it.

9

(a) *elder*: I have used this word deliberately to indicate a term of respect, which to some extent 'old man' no longer has. The Coptic ⲉⲗⲗⲁⲟ, in my view, has a similar range of meanings as the Arabic 'sheikh'.

10

(a) *a single tooth*: In this brief section the condition of Joseph's hair and teeth at death is paralleled in *Vita Antonii* section 93. The general lack of physical debilitation in these and other texts is almost certainly an echo of the death of Moses described in Deut. 34,7.

11

(a) *except for sin alone*: various NT passages insist that Jesus did not sin (e.g. the Gospel text of Jo. 8,46 and Pauline 2 Co. 5,21)

12

(a) *death of Joseph*: later on (21,2) death is personified. Of the two OT figures to whom death is announced, Saul (I Sam. 28, 19) and Hezekiah (2 Kings 20,1), Hezekiah's behaviour is contrasted with that of Joseph: the former is

reluctant to accept the sentence of death and actually obtains a remission, whereas Joseph accepts his fate with resignation. According to a study by J. Leipoldt (one of Morenz's teacher), death seems to have been accepted with more resignation by Greeks than by Jews (*Der Tod bei Griechen und Juden*, 1942).

13

(a) *formed*: the Gk verb *πλάζειν* used here is probably no more than an alternative form of *πλάσσειν* (to form) cf. H. Liddell and R. Scott *Greek-English Lexicon* (1968 rev. ed.) p.1410.

(b) *different faces*: the angel of death in the Testament of Abraham (c.17) has different heads and faces. For pre-Christian material ch. 144 of the Book of the Dead (BD) gives details of all the gatekeepers. Sections of the the papyrus of Ani (British Museum BM 10470) depicting some of the gatekeepers can be found in R.O. Faulkner *Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead* (1983) pp.134-135.

(c) *river of fire*: for the expression of the cleansing power of fire is present in Egyptian funerary see ch. 17 of BD (the Lake of Fire - š *nsr*).

14

This recapitulation seems to indicate that cc. 2-11 may have been inserted later.

(a) *40*: the numbers (40+49+1) all together add up to 90. The number 40 has a significance in Judaism and Christianity (flood (days and nights), periods in the wilderness of Israelites (years) and Christ (days)). The Arabic figures are the same as those of the Bohairic, but the figures in the Sahidic version, which begins here, are different: 40 when married, length of marriage 9 years, one year of widowhood. Mary gave birth, according to ch. 5, in 'her fourteenth year'.

(b) *knows*: Bohairic and Sahidic versions use different verbs: the B verb in its

AE form (*swn*) tends to have the meaning 'know, recognize', while the S verb (*'m*) has more the meaning of 'know, understand'. There may never have been a clear distinction between the two in meaning, and, in my view, 'understand' is more appropriate here.

15

(a) *gold ... silver*: the metaphor of these metals is also used in the Late Egyptian magical Papyrus Harris, where the bones of the god are silver and his flesh gold. The 'flesh' association with gold can be seen in the designation *pr-nbw* (lit. house of gold), meaning the sarcophagus chamber of a royal tomb. The word *hḏ* also means 'light' (albeit with a different taxonomic sign in AE). The Coptic form ⲉⲙⲁⲣ also means 'money'.

16

A central feature of the BD is the so-called Negative Confession (c.125), where the deceased in the underworld has to justify himself (the deceased is normally male), by repeatedly denying wrongdoing, the exact opposite of the declarations in this section.

(a) *on all sides*: ref. to Job 3,23.

17

This looks like an insertion in the story: Joseph, who is after all the central character in the story, has an opportunity to tell, in the words of Jesus, his own story.

(a) *protector*: allusion to Ex, 15,2.

(b) *incredible*: Greek word is παράδοξος

(c) *viper*: this is a new detail in a story that is related in the infancy Gospel of Thomas (see cc. 4 to 9). In the Sahidic version the Gk word for 'viper', though grammatically masculine, is treated as feminine, which may be partly due to the influence of the gender of the various Egyptian words for 'snake'.

18

(a) *tearless*: human emotions are not normally displayed by Jesus. Even in the incident of expelling the moneylenders from the Temple none of the accounts (Mat. 21,23ff; Mk.11,15ff; Lk. 19,45ff) mentions anything like anger.

Interestingly enough, the painting of the subject by Giotto in Padua depicts Jesus, with a fairly angry expression on his face, raised arm and clenched fist, threatening a moneylender.

(b) *is ...going to die*: Coptic uses a particle (ⲁⲫⲟⲩ) here which is often translated as 'perhaps', but Crum *Coptic Dictionary* (1939) p.15b suggests that it can also be used like *nonne* in Latin to ask a question (normally expecting the answer 'yes').

19

(a) *I, my beloved, sat at his head* : Jesus now addresses the apostles directly. The positions of Jesus and Mary here are identical to those of Horus and Isis at the death of Osiris in the representation provided by Morenz on p. 61 from the 6th cent BC. However, the positions are reversed in the much earlier

representation in the mortuary temple of Seti I at Abydos (early 13th cent. BC). Abydos was the principal site of Osiris.

(b) *he was unable to* : both Coptic versions are difficult to translate because they seem to have misunderstood the original. The Arabic does not even try to translate it. My version is what I think it means.

20

(a) *Lysia*: the principal mourners at a funeral were women. There is a fine representation of these women in the tomb of Ramose (Theban Tomb 55), which the unfortunate vizier of Akhenaten (14th cent. BC) had to leave uncompleted in the old capital of Thebes in order to accompany his sovereign to the new capital at Amarna. In the Sahidic version Lysia is called a 'purple seller', an echo of Acts 16,14 (Lydia the purple seller).

21

(a) *Amente*: the word means 'west' in AE, and it is associated with burial. Here it is the 'instrument' of Death, and in the Sahidic version the 'adviser'. In Rev. 6,8 the Gk Hades (Amente) is portrayed as following Death. 'Death' is capitalized here because it is fairly clearly a personification.

(b) *decans*: AE *wš3tj-bk3tj*, 36 groups of stars used to mark the beginning of an hour that also appear every ten days. The 36 groups enabled the Egyptians to work out a 360 day year, supplemented by 5 'extra days'. They are first represented on coffins of the 10th Dynasty (c.2100 BC). The handmaiden of rational astronomical observation often seems to be irrational astrological speculation. In the Sahidic version they are described as 'many faced', an attribute that recalls the 'different faces' of section 13.

(c) *the sinners*: interesting to note the idea that demons recognize fellow-spirits., but, instead of the collegiality of fellow spirits, all that is portrayed

here is anger.

22

(a) *seven dark aeons*: 'aeon' is an elastic term that can refer to almost any period of time; 'seven' has multiple significance, not least the seven days of creation, Egyptian funerary literature (e.g. BD 144) and the 7th hour of the Amduat (What is in the Underworld), of which there is a magnificent copy on the tomb of Thutmose III (Kings Valley tomb 34) from the 16th cent. BC In the gnostic text known as the Pistis Sophia (25,1ff) there is a battle between the aeons and the light.

23

(a) *winding sheet of pure silk*: the Sahidic version of this section, which I have translated above, is much longer than the Bohairic text and calls this a 'winding sheet of light'. The text merely indicates that the body is wrapped in a sheet and says nothing about mummification, which is a little more complicated than wrapping a body in a sheet. Mummification points to a particular sort of relationship with death that Christians were not really supposed to foster, but there seem to be indications that pre-Christian attitudes to the dead still existed. There is an angry speech by St Antony on the subject of the inappropriate treatment of the dead in the *Vita Antonii* c.90. Athanasius in one of his Festal Letters (no.41), availing himself of an opportunity to castigate his Melitian rivals, accuses them of unseemly behaviour with respect to the dead, Shenute the abbot of the White Monastery at Sohag in Upper Egypt in the mid-5th cent AD was at pains to tell local Christians, in a text called an 'exegesis after what we have said and written' on the resurrection that even if their bodies were not intact when they died, this would not affect their chances of resurrection. A link to the text and translation can be found in Pierre Chérrix *Coptica* (<http://www.coptica.ch/223222/index.html>) E.

Amélineau *Oeuvres de Schenoudi* vol. 1 p.212. The body of Samuel of Kalamun was both washed and wrapped at his death cf. Life of Samuel of Kalamun (1983) ed. A. Alcock (chapters 43 and 44).

24

(a) *I closed them and his mouth*: the exact opposite of the standard AE practice, known from the Pyramid Age is known as the Opening of the (Eyes and) Mouth (*wpt r*). Each practice reflects the values attached to the two senses: Ancient Egyptians wanted full use of them, whereas the ascetic Christian ideal was to kill them.

25

- (a) *law of the Jews*: there is no passage from Jewish ritual that substantiates this statement. But in a monastery it was normal for the monastic residents to foregather at a death.
- (b) *9th hour*: the time of Jesus' death in Mk 15, 25 (3 pm). In Mk. 5, 40 Jesus asks the mourners to leave the house of Jairus. Mourning was only for those who died 'godless'.
- (c) *I cast water*: on the practice of washing the body see above note on section 23.
- (d) *heavenly prayers*: the Gospels report on Jesus' praying, but not on the content of the prayers. On the tablets of heaven cf. Bk of Enoch c.81.

26

(a) *dinner of the thousand years*: probably an allusion to Rev. 20,2. If the idea

of eating one's enemies is present here, there may be some distant memory of the spell in the Pyramid Texts (spell 273-274), in which the king is depicted as 'living on his fathers and feeding on his mothers', following the régime of a large breakfast, moderate lunch and light supper.

(b) *offering*: the Gk word used here is the same one used of the Eucharist.

27

(a) *he took me to Egypt*: may point to Egypt as the origin of the story or at least of this version of the story.

28

(a) *O Death*: the central message is that Death is the servant of God and merely does God's bidding.

(b) *900 years*: may contain an obscure allusion to section 5 of Genesis.

(c) *judgement*: the Gk word ἀπόφασις appears to be used as a synonym for death in Coptic grave inscription. Morenz cites Maria Cramer *Die Totenklage bei den Kopten* (1941) (pp.16,17 etc.).

(d) *against his time*: the prep. κατά would often in this context mean 'according to', but this yields little sense, and another meaning 'against' has to be used.

(e) *As for*: the text uses the μέν and δέ construction to contrast Death and Adam.

(f) *chariot of light*: ref. to Elijah's ascent to heaven (3 Kg. 2,11).

29

(a) *spoke ... embraced ... wept*: this description may form a resumption of the final sentence in 27,4 despite the use of the different verbs 'embrace' and

'spread myself'.

(b) *nor had his eyes become dim*: essentially repeating the words of section 10.

30

The story cuts back to the apostles. Their main concern is death itself. They have just heard a moving story about death and now they want to know why Joseph was not permitted to be taken alive to heaven like Enoch and Elijah.

(a) *good things*: this phrase must here refer to the physical body and to the physical nature of Paradise. There is no explanation in any of the canonical scriptures about why these two figures were allowed to live, but there was speculation (Augustine Letter 193 section 5) that the passage in Rev. 11, 3-12 refers to both.

(b) *testament*: Gk. διαθήκη, in this case referring to a report of a death. But in connection with its meaning as a testament, especially in view of the words *takes ... adds*: cf. Deut. 4,2.

(c) *If someone has...*: the idea is that those not familiar with writing will not be familiar with reading and will probably make mistakes.

The various NT allusions in this passage include Acts 2,31; Lk. 2,51; Rev. 22,18

31

Enoch and Elijah are mentioned together in the Sahidic Apocalypse of Elijah 7,4 as celestial residents who will descend to do battle with the 'shameless one'.

32

The final part of this section is an allusion to Rev. 11,3ff.

Original language

Morenz provides enough evidence on pp. 88 to 96 to show that the Coptic versions are translations of Greek originals. On p. 93, for example, he provides two convincing examples of how the Coptic translator has imitated Greek syntax, both involving Greek negative interrogative particles. It would be pointless to go into further detail here.

A note on the Sahidic version

The Sahidic version starts at section 14 and continues to section 23. Since section 23 of the Sahidic text is much more extensive than the Bohairic version, it is worth providing a translation here of the three versions. The Bohairic version has 8 lines of text compared with 33 lines in the Sahidic version, while the Arabic version of the same section has just 3 lines of text.

Bohairic

23. When he had given up his spirit, I embraced him. His soul was taken by the angels, who put it into a winding sheet of pure silk. When I went inside, I sat beside him, and none of those sitting beside him knew that he had died. I caused Michael and Gabriel to watch over his soul because of the powers which were on the path. The angels sang as they went before it until they reached my good Father.

Arabic

23. Michael and Gabriel came to the soul of Joseph, received it and wrapped it up in a winding sheet of light. He gave up the ghost into the hand of my good Father, and He greeted it. None of his children knew that he had died. The angels kept his soul safe from the devil, the darkness which is on the way. The angels sang until they brought it to the places of purification.

Sahidic

23. It happened, after I had said the Amen, Mary my mother was there repeating my heavenly language after me. Then Michael and Gabriel and the chorus of angels came forth from heaven, they came and stood over the body of my father Joseph. Then the death rattle and panting arose strongly upon him, and I knew that the burning hour had come. He continued to utter pangs like those about to give birth, the straits of death behind him like a strong wind and blazing fire consuming much matter. But Death, fear did not let him go over the body of my beloved father Joseph and separate him (from his body). When he looked at me, he saw me sitting at his head, holding his temples. When I realized that Death was afraid to go because of me. I stood up and went outside the door. I found him (Death) waiting alone, very afraid. I said to him, 'You have come from the places of the south, and quickly do what my Father has commanded you to do. But watch over him like the light of your eyes, for he is my father according to the flesh, and he took pains with me in the days of my childhood, fleeing with me from one place to another because of the plot of Herod. I was taught by him like all children whose parents teach them for their (own) benefit. Then Abbaton came in and took the soul of my father Joseph and brought it out of the body at the time when the sun was rising on the twenty-sixth of Epip in peace. All the days of the life of my beloved father make one hundred and eleven years. Michael took two corners of a pure noble silk sheet, Gabriel took the other corners. They received the soul of my beloved father Joseph and put it down into the sheet. None of those sitting with him knew that he had died, not even my mother Mary knew. And I caused Michael and Gabriel to watch over the soul of my beloved father Joseph because of the robbers who are on the paths, and I caused the asomatic angels to keep singing in front of him until they brought him to heaven to my good Father.